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ABSTRACT

The "first wave" of educational reform has applied "top-down" mandates to raise standards and ensure accountability. These reform strategies often fail because they ignore the necessity of changing people's behavior and the everyday realities confronting schools. According to 16 superintendents participating in the National Governors' Association's Project Educational Reform, many reform obstacles, including lack of funds, restrictive laws, teacher unions, teacher certification requirements, and state-mandated tests and course requirements, remove the flexibility and control districts need to make wise education choices. Others note problems with centralized textbook adoption systems, curriculum policies, and models of practice. Too often, reformers place confidence in external knowledge, resources, people, or policies--a practice that makes teachers into passive recipients and ignores schools' heterogeneity. A new wave of educational reform is distinguished by a focus on the individual school as decision-making unit; the development of a collegial, participatory climate; the flexible use of time; an increased personalization of the school environment; a relevant curriculum; and an emphasis on higher order thinking skills for all students. Reform agendas should be based on changing people's behavior; emphasizing processes, not preconceived outcomes; determining what is important; beginning with local problems; eliminating reform barriers; and encouraging innovation and change. (10 references) (MLH)

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Number 2 September 1988

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Reviewing The Effectiveness of "Top-Down" Reform

The "first wave" of reform generated by the early commission reports on the status of American education has applied "top-down" mandates to raise standards and to insure accountability. However, the realities of school circumstances mitigate against the success of most "top-down" strategies. A number of reforms have either been obstructed at the local level or have created unexpected problems. A second wave of educational reform is occurring both as a result of the failure of the first wave and in response to emergent changes in societal expectations. This new generation of reform is accompanied by the recognition that change must take place at the local level and that the logical locus of authority, as well as responsibility, is at that level.

"Top-Down" Reform Efforts

The primary difficulty with "top-down" educational reform strategies is that they are based on the assumption that legislating conditions associated with successful schools is sufficient to create those conditions. This assumption ignores an essential element of school change -- changing people's behavior. While policy can *enable* outcomes, it cannot mandate individual motivation. Even the best planned, best supported, and most promising policy initiatives depend on what happens as individuals throughout the system interpret and act on them (McLaughlin, 1987).

Problems Created By "Top-Down" Mandates

While it is appropriate for legislatures or state boards of education to establish goals, increasingly, schools are having to contend with mandates that make the job of being effective even harder. Researchers find that many schools report instances where the implementation of reform elements have actually obstructed the delivery of quality education (Wayson, 1988).

Where there are mandated performance criteria for all students, teachers report restrictions in dealing with variations in student ability and accomplishment (McCloskey, cited in Wise, 1988). Teachers believe efforts to regulate educational quality through the enforcement of uniform standards actually reduces equity by preventing them from adjusting instruction to differences among students (Wise, 1988). In a study by Pfeifer (1986), teachers described discipline policies that involved so much paperwork that most of the teachers learned to tolerate disruption rather than deal with the administration.

Superintendents from 16 school districts in eight states who participated in the National Governor's Association's *Project Education Reform* say many obstacles prevent them from changing their schools. They complain that lack of funds, restrictive laws, competing priorities, teacher unions, impenetrable bureaucracies, teacher certification requirements, state-mandated course requirements, and burdensome testing take away the flexibility and control that districts need to make wise education choices (*Report on Education Research*, August 10, 1988, p. 2).

A Conspiracy of Good Intentions: America's Textbook Fiasco (Tyson-Bernstein, 1988), describes the current system of

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textbook adoption as one that has filled the schools with "glossily covered blocks of paper whose words emerge to deaden the minds of our nation's youth" and make students enemies of learning. Officials in the 22 states that have a centralized textbook adoption system have increasingly begun to specify all the facts, terms, and topics that must be included in the textbooks they are willing to buy. Such requirements have resulted in simply "mentioning" certain facts to fit the requirements of as many states as possible, providing little of the context that gives the facts meaning.

McNeil's (1988) report documents the consequences of dictating a centralized curriculum policy for schools and a rigid assessment system for teachers. Prior to the implementation of "reform" measures, teachers in the magnet schools of a large urban city were more likely to demand the best of their students, to learn along with their students, and to use their professional knowledge to create exciting learning situations for their students. They exhibited a high degree of professionalism as they worked with colleagues and students. A common element among schools and teachers was a "passion for teaching."

When the school district and state moved to enact "school reforms" and required conformity to a centralized model of practice, teachers found that the official "minimum standards" overwhelmed class time. Those who believed they should be teaching more challenging material resorted to various techniques to minimize the intrusion of the mandated curriculum (McNeil, 1988).

The state-level reforms dictated the teachers' role in the classroom, defined appropriate "teaching behaviors," and reinforced the extreme of teacher-centered practices. Measurability was the guiding principle. Teachers who wanted to practice a more personalized, student-centered teaching style adjusted both the lesson and teaching behaviors for the assessment period. In an effort to establish "minimums," these reforms applied across-the-board generic remedies that served to stifle the creativity of the best teachers and did little to improve the worst. These top-down reforms actually reinforced many of the conditions that created the mediocrity they were intended to eliminate (McNeil, 1988).

Philosophy of External Expertise

Too often, those hoping to improve schools and achieve excellence in education place confidence in external knowledge, resources, people, or policies. Their assumption is that individuals higher up in the bureaucratic structure know more about what is needed to improve the schools than do the individuals who staff the schools.

This *philosophy of external expertise* has a number of flaws. The first is that the available research and the existing policies may not be adequate or powerful enough to create excellence. The second is that such an approach encourages practitioners at all levels to look outside rather than within for solutions to problems, criteria for improvements, or directions for change. A third flaw is that organizational variables at the local level are the crucial elements in reform efforts. A fourth flaw is that mandates and regulations apply equally to all schools. Yet, what seems to distinguish successful schools from not-so-successful schools are the unique organizational norms and belief systems that characterize the individual school.

Elmore (1987) asserts that reforms that make teachers into passive receivers of advice and knowledge from external experts; that use external prescriptions on content and performance to control what teachers teach; and that define the teacher's role through a vast hierarchy of rules, procedures, and sanctions -- serve only to reinforce the mediocre modes of practice they were designed to improve.

A New Generation of Reform

The problems created by mandating change are, in part, a consequence of trying to impose uniformity on schools serving heterogeneous groups of students in classrooms with varying conditions (Corwin & Borman, 1988). Externally imposed practices that are incompatible with local routines, traditions, or resources are likely to be rejected in time.

While previous efforts called for control at the state level, a new generation of reform calls for local involvement that improves what happens in the classroom itself. This press for reform is for strategic changes that restructure the way schools are organized and operated.

This second wave of reform is distinguished by a focus on the individual school as the unit of decision making; the development of a collegial, participatory climate among both students and staff; the flexible use of time; an increased personalization of the school environment with a concurrent atmosphere of trust, high expectations, and sense of fairness; a curriculum that focuses on students' understanding what they learn; and an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills for all students (Michaels, 1988).

A New Basis For Reform

Combs (1988) suggests that basing a reform agenda on the following premises may provide a greater record of success than have past efforts.

- **Concentrate on changing people's beliefs.** To change behavior effectively, educational reform must concentrate on altering the belief systems of the people who make the decisions and do the work. No matter how promising a strategy for reform, if it is not incorporated into teachers' personal belief systems, it will be unlikely to affect behavior in the desired directions.

- **Emphasize processes, not preconceived outcomes.** To change people's beliefs requires creating conditions for change rather than imposing reforms. It calls for open systems of thinking, which work best for problems: 1) that deal with people, 2) whose objectives are broad and complex, and 3) whose outcomes cannot be precisely defined in advance.

- **Determine what is important.** Efforts at reform must be based on ideas that are important to those who must carry them out. Otherwise, they are almost certain to misfire. Worse still, they will destroy morale.

- **Begin with local problems.** If people are going to be motivated to deal with it, they must *own* the problem. Confronting local problems and facilitating the discovery of appropriate solutions is the most likely road to effective reform.

- **Eliminate barriers to reform.** Once barriers have been removed or reduced, commitment is greater and innovations are more likely to be perceived as challenges rather than as threats or impositions.

- **Encourage innovation and change.** If educational reform is to occur from grass roots experimentation, somehow we must find ways to help our profession believe that "it's all right to make mistakes," that *not trying* is the grievous sin.

If we aspire to excellence in schooling, it is necessary to face the fact that mandates originating from political entities cannot accomplish it alone. Such entities can, and should, establish standards and goals. What they should not attempt to established are the methods by which those standards and goals are to be met at the local school site.

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